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Great Thinkers on Self-Education: John Taylor Gatto

Written by [Jamie](#) on March 31, 2009 in [Great Thinkers on Self-Ed](#) - [5 Comments](#)

“Whatever an education is, it should make you a unique individual, not a conformist; it should furnish you with an original spirit with which to tackle the big challenges; it should allow you to find values which will be your road map through life; it should make you spiritually rich, a person who loves whatever you are doing, wherever you are, whomever you are with; it should teach you what is important: how to live and how to die.” (John Taylor Gatto, Dumbing Us Down)

Who is John Taylor Gatto?

John Taylor Gatto is a widely-respected former teacher and the author of many non-fiction books on the problems of compulsory schooling.

After being recognized as the New York City Teacher of the Year in 1990, John Taylor Gatto stood before the crowd and [outlined the problems](#) he saw with the current educational system:

“I’ve noticed a fascinating phenomenon in my 25 years of teaching — that schools and schooling are increasingly irrelevant to the great enterprises of the planet. No one believes anymore that scientists are trained in science classes or politicians in civics classes or poets in English classes. The truth is that schools don’t really teach anything except how to obey orders. This is a great mystery to me because thousands of humane, caring people work in schools as teachers and aids and administrators but the abstract logic of the institution overwhelms their individual contributions. Although teachers do care and do work very hard the institution is psychopathic, it has no conscience. It rings a bell and the young man in the middle of writing a poem must close his notebook and move to different cell where he must memorize that man and monkeys derive from a common ancestor.”

The next year, Gatto was named New York State Teacher of the Year and gave one of the most memorable acceptance speeches in the history of education. He explained that, by nature of the profession, educators teach 7 lessons: confusion, class position, indifference, emotional dependency, intellectual dependency, provisional self-esteem, and a lack of privacy.

Several months later, Gatto resigned from teaching and dedicated his time to sharing his experiences as an educator.

John Taylor Gatto’s Educational Philosophy

As a prolific writer, Gatto has shared many thoughts on the problems of schooling and how they can be remedied. Some of the most important points he makes are:

- Compulsory education harms students
- People learn from authentic experiences and choices
- The family and the community are essential to a child's development

During his years as a teacher, Gatto sought to incorporate all of these positions by helping kids have experiences outside of the classroom (yes, even on school days) and connecting them with people in the community.

In *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*, he explains:

“Bit by bit I began to devise guerrilla exercises to allow as many of the kids I taught as possible the raw material people always use to educate themselves: privacy, choice, freedom from surveillance, and as broad a range of situations and human associations as my limited power and resources could manage. In simpler terms, I tried to maneuver them into positions where they would have the chance to be their own teachers and make themselves the major text of their own education.”

Gatto's students held extensive internships in offices around the neighborhood, spent time volunteering, and often had some rather amazing adventures.

In the account below, Gatto explains how he helped two students develop independence in a very real situation.

How John Taylor Gatto Has Made a Difference

As a high-profile educator, Gatto has been able to spread the word about self-education across the nation. Although it's been over a decade since he resigned, many still turn to his speeches, articles, and books for an inside look at what's happening inside today's classrooms.

Although Gatto's writings tend to focus on the education of children and young adults, his words can help anyone who is trying to make sense of their own schooling experiences and kindle a love of true education.

Further Reading

If you’re interested in learning more about John Taylor Gatto, check out the following resources.

[JohnTaylorGatto.com](#) – Gatto’s Odysseus Group website. Includes free version of book *The Underground History of American Education*. Also includes a free video clip of John’s former classroom and an audio clip entitled: “The Paradox of Extended Education.”

[Why Schools Don’t Educate](#) – Gatto’s acceptance speech upon receiving the 1990 New York Teacher of the Year Award.

[The Seven Lesson School Teacher](#) – Gatto’s popular essay examines the unfortunate lessons that teachers unwittingly share.

[The Curriculum of Necessity or What Must an Educated Person Know?](#) – An exploration of the knowledge people should master in order to find success in life.

[Personal Solutions, Family Solutions](#) – A 1995 article about taking time to be yourself and enjoy your family instead of being a slave to modern institutions.

[I Quit, I Think](#) – Gatto sent this letter to the Wall Street Journal after quitting his teaching job. It explains his reasons for quitting the teaching profession and for despising mandatory schooling.

[Speeches by John Taylor Gatto](#) – Dozens of downloadable speeches and presentations by Gatto.

[What Really Matters](#) – A two-part 1994 article that explores the question of what skills and information is really important in this life – and what isn’t.

Books by John Taylor Gatto

I Recommend



Dumbing Us Down:
The Hidden Curriculum of
Compulsory Schooling, 10th
Anniversary Edition
John Taylor Gatto
(Paperback - Feb 1,



The Underground
History of American
Education: A School
Teacher's Intimate
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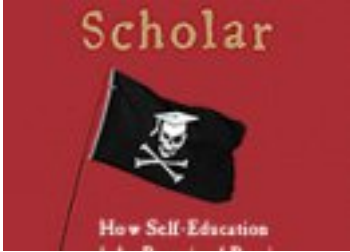
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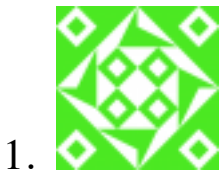


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5 Comments on "Great Thinkers on Self-Education: John Taylor Gatto"



1. [Anthony](#) April 1, 2009 at 8:56 am · [Reply](#)

Gatto's work is amazing.
We are huge fans over @ <http://detentionslip.org>

Anthony David Adams
Founder
DetentionSlip.org
#1 ed blog 2009 – Blogger Choice Awards
Top 25 Blogs of 2009 – Time Magazine



2. [Savant](#) April 2, 2009 at 1:25 pm · [Reply](#)

John Taylor Gatto is a messenger in disguise.



3. [eoauk](#) April 4, 2009 at 3:58 am · [Reply](#)

From a global perspective, in some places, sometimes, people, first, by good educational leadership, need to be made aware of the benefits of education, be it formal or self education and the disinterest and aversion to it to be overcome, as, e.g., in Cyprus, before such a nation can then come to be so interested in formal or self-education as to come to have, reportedly, the highest percentage of

university graduates in the European Union -then the hailed successes of, e.g., the Cypriot writer-poet-thinker-educator, teacher, the late, Orhan Seyfi Ari, and of the likes of him, in effecting such educational philosophy when, even in the face of communal disputes, give fruit, can such, indeed globally worthy of consideration, philosophies on education globally re-vision with such idealism as, e.g., of the same -teacher Ari's, in: <http://www.geocities.com/bbmphl>



4.

Jamie April 7, 2009 at 9:38 am · [Reply](#)

I'm glad to see there are others who embrace Gatto's philosophy. When I first discovered him a few years back, I couldn't stop reading everything he'd published. I kept thinking: "Yes! This is what I believe!"



5.

[eoauk](#) July 18, 2010 at 2:48 am · [Reply](#)

The above site on the late teacher Othan Seyfi Ari is now on: <http://www.orhanseyfiari.com>

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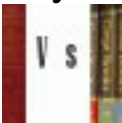
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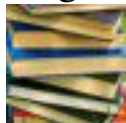
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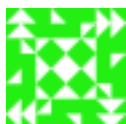
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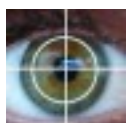
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[George: The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.](#)

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